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ABSTRACT

In her address to the National Congress of Mothers' first meeting in 1897, writer, clubwoman, and abolitionist Frances Watkins Harper appealed to the elite white organizers to support black education. The Congress of Mothers (later the Parent Teachers Association or PTA) became a national organization overnight and by 1930 had nearly one million members. Black women who were interested in education, social reform, and self help founded clubs since the early national period. In the late 19th century these clubs coalesced to form the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). This paper focuses on the history of African Americans' educational efforts through mothers' clubs and parent-teacher groups in the U.S. South from the late 1890s, when the NACW and PTA were founded, to the organization of the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (NCCPT) in the late 1920s. The paper examines efforts undertaken in the segregated schools of the South and reveals how black parent-teacher groups and women's clubs supported education and worked with national associations to secure educational goals. It argues that black PTAs, unlike their white counterparts, were central to the establishment of a school system for African Americans in the South and were unified by a political agenda to promote integrated schools and interracial cooperation. The paper notes that parent-teacher groups in black and white schools had different attitudes in black schools. No distinction was made between parents and teachers. The focus was on the work to be done, while in white schools the focus was on cooperation between constituencies. (Contains a table and 106 notes.) (BT)

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Black Parent-Teacher Associations and the Origins of the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, 1896-1926

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SO 031 879

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Introduction

> I do not ask any special favor for the colored mother. . . . But I do ask you to give what we can not touch with our hands, the ideal things that can not be measured with a line nor weighed in a balance. . . . Trample, if you will, on our bodies, but do not crush out of self-respect from our souls. If you want us to act as women, treat us as women.
>
> - Frances Ellen Watkins Harper
> February 1897[1]

In her address to the National Congress of Mothers' first meeting in 1897, writer, clubwoman, and abolitionist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper appealed to the elite white organizers to support black education. Citing thirty years of emancipation from slavery and paltry gains made in the schooling of the freedpeoples, Harper implored the women of the Congress, at the very least, to provide for the education of the young black women in domestic service in their homes. "A young girl trained as a kindergarten pupil might be of great value to a young mother as a useful assistant in the work of child-rearing."[2] Harper was the only black speaker or delegate on record among the 2,000 at the highly publicized event. The NCM was the perfect venue for her platform, having attracted the attention of well-known educators, women's club leaders, and philanthropists, and garnered the endorsement of a U. S. president.

The Congress of Mothers (NCM), which later became the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, or PTA, became a national association virtually overnight. Piggybacking on the General Federation of Women's Clubs, it was orchestrated by group of elite, white women in Washington, D.C., and it promoted parent education and home-school cooperation, and

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[1]Harper, "The Afro-American Mother," in *Work and Words of the National Congress of Mothers* (Washington, DC: National Congress of Mothers, 1897), 70.
[2]Harper, 71. For biographical information on Harper, see Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), 231-232; Louis Filler, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper," in *Notable American Women*, vol. 2, 138.

encouraged greater interest in and support of child welfare services. The NCM enlisted in its membership mothers' clubs, school improvement societies, and other white women's clubs, and was a clearinghouse, providing guidance in discussion groups, recommending books, and encouraging women to learn more about parenting and to volunteer at their local schools.[3] State chapters completed the NCM's federated structure, with 49 state and territory associations in place by 1926. At the national level it worked toward legislation that benefited children and families. By 1930, the PTA had nearly one million members. (An overview of the national membership of the PTA and National Association of Colored Women (NACW) is presented in Table 1.) As William Cutler argues, by the 1920s, parent-teacher groups were commonplace though not universal.[4]

Year	PTA Membership*	Year	NACW Membership**
1897	2,000	1896	5,000
1910	20,000	1904	15,000
1920	189, 202	1915	50,000
1925	875,240	1924	100,000
		1927	250,000

Table 1

*Source: National PTA Archives Collection, Chicago, Illinois
**Source: Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as the Climb*, xvii

An examination of the origins of the PTA reveals that the founding leaders sought to make the association inclusive to women of different races, ethnicities, and religions during a time when segregated schools and public spaces were enforced by custom and Jim Crow laws. Their pronouncement that the association would be open "to all mankind and to all womankind,

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[3]Christine Woyshner, "To Reach the Rising Generation through the Raising Generation': The Origins of the National Parent-Teacher Association," Ed.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1999.

[4]William W. Cutler III, *Parents and the Schools: The 150-Year Struggle for Control in Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming), 81-82.

regardless of race, color, or condition,"[5] sounds all the more progressive when one remembers that it came just a year after the Supreme Court's ruling on Plessy v. Ferguson. Not surprisingly, the number of African Americans was negligent in the membership of the PTA. Noting this irony in retrospect, a black PTA historian remarked, "From 1897 until 1908 the WHITE organization had shown little or no interest in NEGRO children although they were sworn to work for child welfare. . ."[6]

Black women who were interested education, social reform, and self help had founded clubs since the early national period. In the late nineteenth century, these clubs coalesced in the forming of the National Association of Colored Women, in 1896. (See Table 1 for membership figures.) The NACW focused on many activities in name of racial uplift, including a strong emphasis on education. However, in 1926, a national black PTA was founded in Atlanta, called the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. The NCCPT was established as a "sister" organization to the PTA that "was to function only in those states where separate schools for the races were maintained."[7] In this article I focus on African Americans' educational efforts through mothers' clubs and parent-teacher groups in the South, from the late 1890s, when the NACW and PTA were founded, to the organization of the NCCPT in the late 1920s. I examine efforts undertaken in the segregated schools of the South and reveal how black parent-teacher groups and women's clubs supported education and worked with national

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[5]National Congress of Parents and Teachers, *Golden Jubilee History, 1897-1947* (Chicago: National Congress of Parents and Teachers), 38.
[6]Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. *Golden Anniversary History* (Atlanta, GA: Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, 1970), 8; emphasis in the original.
[7]National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, *Coral Anniversary History* (Dover, Delaware: National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, 1961), 9. Manuscript located at the National PTA Archives Collection, Chicago, Illinois. In this article I refer to the National Congress of Parents and Teachers as the PTA and the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers as the NCCPT to avoid confusion.

associations to secure educational goals. I argue that black PTAs, unlike their white counterparts, were central to the establishment of a school system for African Americans in the South and were unified by a political agenda to promote integrated schools and interracial cooperation.

Parent and community involvement in the black schools of the South challenge the understandings established in research on the history of the relationship between parents and teachers and communities and schools. First, recent research has focused on what parent-teacher relations have looked like in white communities, and therefore have rested on a framework of cooperation/collaboration versus conflict. These earlier studies appear to have followed the query posed in Barbara Finkelstein's 1976 essay in which she asks, "What are some of the sources of conflict and cooperation between the family and the school?"[8] Tensions between white parents and teachers arise out of different approaches to childrearing and differing opinions over who has responsibility for education.[9] This question set the tone for subsequent research, including the recent book by William Cutler, in which the conflict/cooperation framework provides the central analysis. Cutler's study describes the history of parents and their efforts on behalf of public education as adversarial in the mid-nineteenth century, reciprocal (or parents

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[8]Geraldine Clifford refers to Barbara Finkelstein's earlier essay in "Home and School in Nineteenth Century America: Some Personal History Reports from the United States," *History of Education Quarterly* 18 (Spring 1978): 4; See also Barbara Finkelstein, "In Fear of Childhood: Relationships between Parents and Teachers in Popular Primary Schools in the Nineteenth Century," *History of Childhood Quarterly* 3 (Winter 1976): 321-325.

[9]Studies that speak to this include Maris Vinovskis, "Family and Schooling in Colonial and Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of Family History* 12, no. 1-3 (1987): 19-37 and Lawrence A. Cremin, "Family-Community Linkages in American Education: Some Comments on the Recent Historiography," *Teachers College Record* 79, no. 4 (1978): 689-695. Moreover, these and similar studies look at trends rather than associations, and in so doing overlook the strength generated in PTAs and other associations, which through sheer numbers can effect change more readily than through scattered individual attempts.

as assistants, allies, and advocates) at the turn of the twentieth century, and again adversarial by the 1950s.[10]

Community-school linkages look different in African American communities, and in particular in the segregated schools of the South after Reconstruction and into the twentieth century, because black parents and teachers worked together to secure educational opportunities for their youth. According to James Anderson, after having been denied access to literacy and education because of slavery, education for the freedpeoples became both an expression of freedom and a "safeguard against fraud and manipulation."[11] And, through decades of oppression following Reconstruction, southern blacks rallied around the need to provide education for their young in the hopes that it would lead to release from oppressive conditions as well as economic stability and security. The form this most often took was double taxation, in which southern blacks were taxed to support local public schools, but since the majority of that money went to white schools, they voluntarily contributed funds to build and maintain schools for black children. Through these "auxiliary expenses," the burden of black parents and teachers was, according to Anderson, how blacks dealt with their oppression from 1900 to 1935.[12] In addition to double taxation, community members and teachers provided labor and materials to improve schools, and provided teacher

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[10]William W. Cutler, *Parents and Schools.*

[11]James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 18. Other sources that detail the importance of education for African Americans from the late-nineteenth to the early-twentieth centuries include Donald G. Nieman, ed., *African Americans and Education in the South, 1865-1900* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994) and Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Many other works illustrate the importance of education as a central theme in black history. For example, see Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A Shining Thread of Hope: The History of Black Women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998).

[12]Anderson, 183-184.

training and parent education. By the turn of the twentieth century, black PTAs were becoming more common, due to the efforts of black teachers and principals, Jeanes supervisors, and normal school and college educators.[13]

The PTA and NACW

The post-Reconstruction era, or the time of the new South, saw a backslide in the rights of African Americans and their subjugation under white supremacy. C. Vann Woodward remarks on the "colonial status for the Southern economy," wherein the per-capita wealth of the South lagged significantly behind that of the north. "Distribution of the better things of life—health, education, and the standard of living—in the colonial economy reflected not only these gross disparities between the South and other regions but also appalling inequities within the region itself."[14] Inequities were perhaps most pronounced in the schools for African American children. "Black rural southerners, unlike working classes elsewhere in America, could expect little support for common schools from state and local governments" since their funding was diverted to white schools.[15] Within this context, the PTA mirrored the colonial economic model through its efforts to educate the less fortunate through club work and guide black women from a distance.[16] In a reaction to these attempts, black women instead founded their own PTAs

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[13]The Jeanes Foundation, beginning in 1907, provided funds to hire field supervisors whose task it was to maintain and improve school plants, provide parent and teacher education, address health and curriculum concerns, and promote interracial solidarity. See NASC Interim History Writing Committee, *The Jeanes Story: A Chapter in the History of American Education, 1908-1968* (Atlanta, GA: Southern Education Foundation, 1979); Anderson, 86, 153; Valinda Littlefield, "Annie Holland and the Struggle to Educate North Carolina's Neglected," unpublished paper.

[14]C. Vann Woodward, *Thinking Back: The Perils of Writing History* (Baton Rouge, LA: University of Louisiana Press, 1986), 65-66.

[15]Anderson, 148.

[16]Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare and the State, 1890-1930* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 55.

and mothers' clubs in the South which were infused with the values of pride and self-efficacy. Black PTAs promoted leadership skills, an infusion of African American history into the curriculum, and created networks of pride and support between schools and communities, particularly in poor, rural areas.[17]

The different emphases of black and white parent-teacher associations reflect different racial and socioeconomic positions in society. Moreover, the differences between black and white women's approaches to parent-teacher associations is grounded in their contrasting ideologies of womanhood and motherhood. Anne Firor Scott argues, "even more vehemently than white [club] women, black [club] women emphasized the home as the vital center of reform, and taught gentility as a counter to racial stereotypes, particularly those that labeled all black women as immoral."[18] Whereas for white women the home was their domain in which they were to educate their children and exert moral influence, for Black women, "the home was not so much a refuge from the outside world as a bulwark to secure one's passage through it."[19] White women did not have to feel the same pressures of societal threats. This much was apparent in Mary Church Terrell's plea to the mothers' congress in 1899. Terrell presented her greetings from the NACW to the women of the PTA and asked, "Did it ever occur to you, Mothers of the Congress, how difficult a thing it is for colored women to inspire their

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[17]An excellent example of community support of black education in the South, beginning in the 1930s is found in Walker, *Their Highest Potential*.

[18]Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 147.

[19]Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 100.

children with hope or offer them an incentive for their best endeavor under the existing conditions of things in this country?"[20]

Molly Ladd-Taylor examines women's clubs in relation to her construct of "sentimental maternalism," which she characterizes as white women's belief that women's highest calling was marriage and childrearing.[21] But sentimental maternalism is best exemplified by the NCM, a white women's organization, and does not hold for black women's organizations.[22] Likewise, Ladd-Taylor's other examples of maternalism and feminism use white women's associations as archetypes. Nonetheless, "maternalist politics were necessarily racial politics," and this is certainly evidenced in the NCM's claims that they would not discriminate based on race because all women were mothers first, a condition that united them across racial and ethnic barriers in theory.[23] But the social and political climate of the 1890s and early twentieth century necessarily held that women of color would not be treated as equals. Contrasting the sentimental maternalism of the PTA women, Giddings reveals that "[Black] clubwomen believed women should not be forced into traditional roles," and generally accepted the notion that not all women were intended for motherhood.[24] As Jacqueline Jones argues, Black women led starkly different lives in regard to

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[20]Mary Church Terrell, "Greetings from the National Association of Colored Women," *National Association Notes* 2 (March 1899):1; as reprinted in Nancy F. Cott, Jeanne Boydston, Anne Braude, Lori Ginzberg, and Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Root of Bitterness: Documents of the Social History of American Women* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 406.
[21]Ladd-Taylor, 8. Ladd-Taylor never fully describes what she means by the term "sentimental," as opposed to progressive maternalists; she only writes that the National Congress of Mothers is the best example.
[22]The issue of contrasting ideologies toward womanhood between black and white women is explored in Linda M. Perkins, "The Role of Education in the Development of Black Feminist Thought, 1860-1920," *History of Education* 22, no. 3 (1993): 265-275.
[23]Ladd-Taylor, 49.
[24]Giddings, 108.

labor, employment, and childrearing; labor—waged and unwaged—was a constant in African American women's lives.[25]

Black and white women had different attitudes toward the poor. White women were more likely to differentiate the worthy from the unworthy poor, unlike black women's clubs.[26] Black women's perspective on class and poverty favored environmental factors, "not circumstances of birth or previous experience."[27] In fact, "black club women frequently successfully bridged the class barrier and concerned themselves with issues of importance to poor women, working mothers, [and] tenant farm wives."[28] This differing perspective gave black mothers' clubs a different approach to working with less fortunate women and children, and this work carried over to parent-teacher work the schools of the segregated South. "The fact that [black women] shared with their poorer sisters all the indignities of racial prejudice and the stigma attached to black women gave a different tone to their statements and their work."[29]

Save for the occasional black speaker who addressed the delegates at annual meetings, the PTA remained primarily a white women's association. On the local level, few examples of integrated parent-teacher associations and mothers' clubs could be found, and they tended to follow the custom of

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[25]Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*.
[26]Scott, 14.
[27]Giddings, 98. This notion is challenged by James Leloudis's study of the Women's Association for the Betterment of Public School Houses. The all-white association, which existed in North Carolina from around 1902 to 1919 did perceive the children of the laboring classes as products of their social environments. Nonetheless, the women of the WABPS saw these children and families as unlike themselves, and sought to reform them by improving the schools. James L. Leloudis II, "School Reform in the New South: The Woman's Association for the Betterment of Public School Houses in North Carolina, 1902-1919," *The Journal of American History* 69, no. 4 (1983): 899-900.
[28]Gerda Lerner, "Community Work of Black Club Women," *The Majority Finds Its Past* (New York, 1982), 93. See also Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).
[29]Scott, 16.

segregation. The Annie Murray Club was the only African American women's club in Des Moines in 1902, and had some connection with the state congress of mothers, though this connection is not clear.[30] In 1908, the Colored Child Welfare Clubs of Washington, D. C., joined the PTA.[31] Indeed, one must search closely for references to black PTAs in the National PTA organizational literature. Scanning years at a time of organizational papers reveals only the occasional brief mention of black PTAs and mothers' clubs. For example, in the "State News" section of *Child Welfare* magazine in 1918, a reporter from the Nashville Central Council, a white parent-teacher group in Tennessee remarked at the end of her report that, "Mrs. T. H. Burlinson, chairman of 'war gardens,' has had wonderful success and this applies to both white and colored."[32] No further comment was made.

Advertisements for a reception at the PTA's fourth annual meeting in Des Moines reminded members that "every mother identified with the Congress, rich or poor, black or white, is welcome to attend this reception, her tiny badge of pink and blue being her credential of admission."[33] However, what is not apparent in this statement is that black groups were often relegated to separate seating areas and banquet tables.[34] Blaming society rather than the organization, PTA historians Harry and Bonaro Overstreet explain, "the Congress [PTA] did not operate in a social vacuum; it operated

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[30]Iowa Congress of Parents and Teachers, *A History of the Iowa Congress of Parents and Teachers, 1900-1941* (Des Moines, IA: Iowa Congress of Parents and Teachers, n.d.), 42.
[31]"The History of the District of Columbia Congress of Parents and Teachers, 1905-1955," unpublished manuscript, National PTA Archives Collection, Chicago, Illinois, 8.
[32]National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations, *Child Welfare* 12, no. 10 (1918): 211.
[33]*A History of the Iowa Congress of Parents and Teachers, 1900-1941*, 42.
[34]Ladd-Taylor, 58; Woyshner, 152. Examples of segregation within the PTA can be found in Ohio, Iowa, and Tennessee during this time.

in a society that, at certain times and in certain places, has drawn racial lines."[35]

Yet, I believe that African American women affiliated with the NACW—when they did feel it necessary to affiliate with a national association—in the late 1890s and into the 1920s not by default, but by choice. The NACW was founded in 1896 "to elevate and dignify colored American womanhood" and to "foster 'moral, mental, and material progress';" it even had a department of "Mother, Home and Child" that was focused on education.[36] Prior to 1920, the majority of women in the NACW were teachers, a membership that most certainly influenced the direction and activities of the organization. Whether they were welcomed by the PTA or not, black women most likely felt a stronger allegiance to the NACW, especially as it allowed them autonomy over childrearing practices, schooling, and community reforms.

PTA leaders watched the progress and establishment of the NACW "with great interest."[37] In 1908, the PTA intervened when it broached the idea of forming a segregated Mothers' Congress for black women and even went so far as to identify a black woman leader "who would take the initiative in forming a congress of colored mothers."[38] The attempt was deemed unsuccessful by white PTA leaders because a national association was not the result of their efforts. However, it did catalyze the founding of local-level PTAs in the South according to one NCCPT historian.[39] By the 1920s, the PTA had white fieldworkers to promote and encourage the establishment

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[35]Harry Overstreet and Bonaro Overstreet, *Where Children Come First: A Study of the PTA Idea* (Chicago: National Congress of Parents and Teachers, 1949), 267.
[36]Sieglinde Lemke, "Introduction," in Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb* (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1996), xv, xx.
[37]Overstreet and Overstreet, 268.
[38]National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, *Coral Anniversary History*, 7.
[39]Ibid.

of black parent-teacher groups and had created the "Committee-at-Large on Extension among Colored People."

In the late 1920s, with one-quarter million NACW members and the organizing of the NCCPT, African American women had two national associations to support and further educational goals. There could likely have been an overlap in the membership of the two associations, though black women might not have felt that they were working at cross purposes, but perhaps redoubling their efforts by supporting both. Around 1930, in a rare statement that makes the connection between the two groups explicit, Kentucky club women reported the following to the NACW:

> The Parent-Teacher Association work, both state and national, has claimed the attention of our Kentucky Club Women. Nearly every town in Kentucky has active Parent-Teacher Associations and these are fostered and kept alive by our club women.[40]

Given that the membership in the Kentucky Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, which was formed in 1921, was around 1,000 strong, it makes sense that the group relied heavily on Kentucky Club Women, who may not have wished to pay dues to two national associations. Indeed, in the same report, the Peerless [Women's] Club of Henderson, Kentucky, reported in 1930 that it had contributed to the Douglass High School Parent-Teacher Association toward the purchase of a new school building.[41]

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The black club leaders who were invited to address the PTA at its annual conventions in its early years, are a rare example of the association's adherence to its policy of inclusion.[42] The first one to do so, Frances Harper,

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[40]Davis, 304.
[41]Davis, 307.
[42]It should be noted that the PTA leaders worked closely with the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and vice versa, as there was an overlap in membership and activities between the two organizations. However, it remains to be known whether PTA leaders were considered

had used the themes and values of the PTA—motherhood, Christianity, and progress—to argue for respect for Black women. She concurred with the notion that the home was the place where parents could instruct their children in Christian morality and citizenship and asked, "Has not the colored mother a claim not simply upon your compassion, but also on your sense of justice?"[43]

In 1899, Mary Church Terrell spoke at the PTA's annual meeting and presented a greeting from the women of the NACW. Community leader, suffragist, and teacher, Terrell was from Memphis and a graduate of Oberlin College. She taught at the M Street School in Washington, D.C., and later served on the District of Columbia Board of Education from 1895 to 1901 and then again from 1906 to 1911, the first Black woman to do so.[44] Terrell's address to the PTA asked that they embrace an education for children that fought racism and oppression:

> May I not ask you then, that when you teach your children the lofty principles which this Congress represents, you will make a special effort to train them to be just and broad enough to judge men and women by their intrinsic merit, rather than by the adventitious circumstances of race, or color or creed?[45]

Terrell had challenged the PTA's public assertion that no color line would be drawn.[46]

At the 1900 convention, Washington, D. C., kindergartner Anna J. Murray presented the topic "Mothers' Clubs Among Colored Women." She

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"friends to Blacks," as Lucy Stone was. See Linda Perkins, "The Role of Education in the Development of Black Feminist Thought," 274.

[43]Harper, "The Afro-American Mother," 69.

[44]For more on Terrell, see Dorothy Sterling, "Mary Eliza Church Terrell," in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, 679.

[45]Terrell, "Greetings from the National Association of Colored Women," 407.

[46]*New York Journal*, December 9, 1896, scrapbook , "The National PTA/National PTA Newspaper Clippings, 1896-1911," PTA. The *Journal* printed the following statement from the NCM: "There will be no color line drawn. The leaders in this great movement want that particularly understood. There will be delegates from the organizations of colored women, and possibly an address or two."

berated the southerners who sought to "govern men without their consent by depriving them of a voice in the selection of their laws and lawmakers; [it] is open defiance of the principles upon which this nation was founded."[47] Murray gave an overview of the work of the clubs of the NACW, sharing their successes in establishing kindergartens and day nurseries and building homes for the sick and aged. She had asked PTA leaders for permission to solicit funds for kindergartens in Washington, D. C., prior to her talk, but she was denied permission to do so. PTA officers, claiming that they did not want their conventions to become forums for fundraising, assured her that "those who wished to learn more of [your] special work could seek information from [you] in person."[48] Nonetheless, Murray appealed to NCM values of home and early education, and mentioned that the kindergarten met the special needs of her race, but needed funds to establish more of them.[49] Racism and equal access to education were very much on the minds of black club leaders who addressed the National PTA in its early decades, but they found merely a token acknowledgment of the need to change the status quo. Educational improvement efforts in the South found a home in black women's clubs and parent-teacher associations.

Black Women's Clubs and Education

A public school system for black children in the South was not established until the first three decades of the twentieth century. "This transformation was effected by ordinary black men and women, local white school officials, small numbers of southern white lay people, and northern

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[47]Mrs. A. J. Murray, "Mothers' Clubs Among Colored Women," in *Quarterly Report* 1, no. 1 (1900): 63.
[48]NCM Minutes, May 21, 1900, 68, National PTA Archives Collection, Chicago, Illinois.
[49]Murray, "Mothers' Clubs Among Colored Women," 62.

philanthropic agencies."[50] Still, the majority of black children who did attend school in the early twentieth century did so for fewer than six months. As Scott points out, black schools were especially dependent upon community resources, as well as the support of women's clubs, due to their being poorly funded by state and local governments.[51] "Since Reconstruction days the schoolteacher in her one-room schoolhouse was sustained by the fund-raising committees of black church ladies' auxiliaries long before she was the beneficiary of white philanthropy."[52] For example, in Washington, D. C., teacher Marion Shadd organized teachers' meetings that addressed the issue of "parental duty" during the 1898-1899 school year.[53] Twenty years later, Shadd was continuing the outreach to black parents in the district, but this time as principal.[54] During the same period, the NACW had established kindergartens, day nurseries, and schools of domestic science, and promoted nurse training and the placing of nurses in schools.[55]

In the early years of the twentieth century, the number of African American parent-teacher groups and school improvement societies began to increase.[56] As one black PTA historian put it, "The efforts of the National

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[50]Anderson, 152.
[51]Scott, 150.
[52]Lerner, "Community Work of Black Club Women," *The Majority Finds Its Past*, 84. See also Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America*, especially pages 435-437.
[53]Beverly J. Weiss, "An African American Teacher in Washington, D. C.: Marion P. Shadd (1856-1943), in Madelyn Holmes and Beverly J. Weiss, *Lives of Women Public Schoolteachers: Scenes from American Educational History* (1995), 206.
[54]Weiss, 211.
[55]The Delaware Federation of the NACW reported in 1916 that it had "asked the City Board of Education for a colored nurse for the public schools" and had received such an appointment. Davis, 121. Similar efforts could be founding Jacksonville, Florida. Davis, 125.
[56]This evidence challenges the claims of historians who have stated that black parent-teacher associations did not come about until later. For example, Ladd-Taylor claims that "separate 'colored' mothers' clubs and parent-teacher associations appeared during the 1920s," Ladd-Taylor, 58. Similarly, Nancy Cott asserts that "[t]he founding in 1926 of a National Colored Parent-Teachers Association indicated black women's similar concerns for their children's welfare," Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 87. Likewise, such claims are curious, given the extensive efforts of the National Association of Colored Women's clubs in the decades prior. Scott's research on women's

Congress of Mothers to organize a congress of Negro mothers was having its effect in the South. Parents, teachers, and welfare workers of both races. . . set about to organize similar associations in a number of Negro schools."[57] For example, the PTA of Georgia donate ten dollars in the early 1920s toward the founding of the Georgia State [Black] Council of Parents and Teachers.[58] However, another impetus came from the Jeanes Foundation, established in 1907 and also known as the Negro Rural School Fund, which sent supervisors around rural territories. One of the main endeavors of Jeanes Supervisors was to organize school improvement leagues and other parent-teacher groups.[59]

Among the earliest known black PTAs were those in Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Georgia, and Premier, West Virginia. These groups were unlike the colored child welfare clubs of Washington, D. C., in that they did not affiliate with the PTA.[60] Olive Taylor, the principal of the Yonge Street Public School in Atlanta, founded a black PTA in 1911. Taylor then worked with members Selena Sloan Butler and Cora B. Finley to found PTAs at the other public schools of Atlanta. Within a year, Butler had taken the lead in organizing the Parent-Teacher Council of Atlanta. By the end of the decade, a state-wide meeting of parent-teacher groups had been called and an organization established with the contribution of ten dollars from the white PTA which "aided the beginning units who had very few funds of their

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organizations in U. S. history reveals that black women, "had been organized for many decades to deal with the social needs of their own people," Scott, 90. See also Gerda Lerner, ed., *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History.*

[57]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary*, 7.

[58]Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. *Golden Anniversary History*. 10.

[59]*Jeanes Story*, 26.

[60]District of Columbia Congress of Parents and Teachers, "The History of the District of Columbia Congress of Parents and Teachers, 1905-1955," unpublished manuscript, NCPT archives, Chicago, IL, n.d., 8.

own."[61] Parallel efforts could be found in the work of a School Improvement Committee established in Atlanta in 1913. Members of the SIC, after having surveyed the conditions of black schools appealed to white religious leaders and white clubwomen. The SIC invited the public to visit black schools and to view a slide show on their conditions. Though their efforts resulted in a temporary school building and higher salaries for black teachers, "such pressure was inadequate to alter the racial neglect of black schools."[62]

In Henderson, Kentucky, the parent-teacher association of Alves Street and Douglass High Schools was organized in 1910. This association served its school community by establishing playgrounds, providing books for the school libraries, and built a new high school that was later turned into a community center.[63] In Premier, West Virginia, Dr. W. W. Sanders founded a school improvement group in 1911 in a one-room schoolhouse he was in charge of. Three years later he was chosen as the first black state supervisor of Negro schools in the United States. His interest in PTAs continued, as he encouraged schools around the state to form associations. By 1916, fifteen counties in West Virginia had parent-teacher organizations and in 1923 Sanders initiated a state-wide black parent-teacher association.[64]

In 1916, in Jacksonville, Florida, Stanton High School principal Isaiah Blocker started the Patrons Club, the first known parent-teacher group in Florida. Blocker and his wife, Mary Blocker, worked in developing a parent-teacher group when he transferred to the Davis Street School. In the summer of 1925 Mary Blocker and Selena Butler met at Spelman College and began a friendship that carried over to their collaboration in the founding of the

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[61]Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. *Golden Anniversary History*. 10; NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 58.
[62]Lerner, "Community Work of Black Club Women," *The Majority Finds Its Past*, 89.
[63]Davis, 308-309.
[64]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 73.

NCCPT in 1926.[65] Butler had a long history of volunteer work with the NACW and YWCA in Georgia.[66]

In 1917 in Fort Worth, Texas, Mrs. W. S. Benton organized a mothers' club in her home. Principals in Fort Worth supported her endeavor and encouraged her to create mothers' clubs affiliated with each public school in Fort Worth. According to an NCCPT history, Benton then went on to found PTAs in Dallas, Mineral Wells, LaRue, Clarendon, and Port Arthur, covering more than 600 miles in order to do so![67] Dedication to founding PTAs can be found elsewhere, in both black and white groups, reflecting the missionary zeal with which women organizers approached parent-teacher work.[68] Many questions are raised, then, by Benton's travels in Texas. Why did she choose those cities? With whom did she travel and organize? Other organizers faced the same challenges. In 1920, Charlotte Hawkins Brown recounted her treacherous journey to speak at the Association of Southern Women to Prevent Lynching in Memphis. Because of her refusal to sit in the segregated car she attended the event "crushed and humiliated."[69] For example, Sarah F. Brown, the second president of the NCCPT, faced significant obstacles in transportation. "Many nights were spent traveling by train in order that she might be able to attend a meeting the next day. Often she was met at the train station in a two-horse wagon and had to ride over the poor and uncomfortable roads in order to visit the organized unit or to organize new units."[70] Though the NCCPT histories do not specifically refer to segregated

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[65]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 63.
[66]Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. *Golden Anniversary History*. 17; Davis, 11.
[67]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 66.
[68]See Woyshner, "To Reach the Rising Generation'," Chapter Five. Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. *Golden Anniversary History*. 29,
[69]Papers of the Association of Southern Women to Prevent Lynching, Trevor Arnett Library, Atlanta University as reprinted in Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America*, 468.
[70]Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. *Golden Anniversary History*. 29.

means of transportation, it was an ever-present concern that was compounded by the burdens of inadequate transportation and traveling alone.

In Delaware, many African American parent-teacher groups were founded by white members. Until the early 1920s, black PTAs were organized under the Delaware Congress of Parents and Teachers (DCPT). Concerned that there was only one black member of the state board of managers, black PTAs founded their own state association in the mid 1920s. As explained in an NCCPT history, "But probably the main reason for their leaving the [DCPT] was agreement between the Negro and white leaders that the Negroes could work more effectively and gain better leadership experience if they had their own group."[71]

Kentucky reveals yet another different way black parent-teacher groups were started. In the 1910s, parents as well as teachers were welcomed at the annual conventions of the Kentucky Teachers and Education Association (KTEA). When attendance became too large, "proper disposition of the nonteaching element soon constituted a problem for the Education Association."[72] The KTEA's officers in 1917 relegated the nonteachers to a separate department which later evolved to a statewide PTA around 1921.[73]

This was a common strategy, as often the annual meetings of statewide black parent-teacher associations and teachers organizations were held at the same time. For example, the Teachers State Association of Texas and the state black PTA association decided to hold their meetings together beginning in 1925.[74] The same could be found in Kentucky, Georgia, and Virginia. The

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[71]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 64.
[72]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 79.
[73]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 79-80.
[74]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 66. In many cases, southern states formed statewide black parent-teacher associations before the NCCPT was founded. This organizational

South Carolina State Teachers Association encouraged black PTAs in the state form a statewide organization. In 1931, they invited local black PTA representatives and officers of the North Carolina Congress of Parents and Teachers to their annual meeting to discuss the prospect of holding their meetings concurrently.[75] Doing so was supported by NCCPT organizer Butler, who suggested that they meet during teachers' and other conventions in order to "take advantage of convention rates. . . and of the opportunity to get white state and national officers and speakers."[76] This was not uncommon, as groups such as the NACW planned their meetings around other associations because of discrimination and lack of funding.[77]

Not surprisingly, there was some overlap in leadership between the NACW and NCCPT and its state affiliates, the most notable being Selena Sloan Butler, NCCPT founder. Butler was also involved in starting up the NACW. She represented the Atlanta Women's Club in 1895 at the meeting in Boston called by Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and others.[78] She was the first president of the Georgia Federation of Colored Women's Clubs from 1902-1905.[79] Also present in Boston was Mrs. M. A. Dillard of Selma, Alabama. Dillard, who was representing the Woman's Mutual Improvement Club of Selma, was later elected the first president of the State Mothers' League of Alabama, in 1914.[80] Hattie M. Reese of Albany, Georgia, was involved with

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development contrasts with the PTA, which began as a national association. The states that had organized black associations were Alabama (1914), Texas (1920), Delaware (between 1921 and 1925), Georgia (1921), Kentucky (1921), West Virginia (1923), Washington, D.C. (1925), and Virginia (1926).

[75]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 71.

[76]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 11.

[77]See, for example, Davis, 15. The call to the first national conference of colored women explained: "The Christian Endeavor Society brings to Boston fifty thousand delegates in July, railroad rates all over the country are consequently reduced."

[78]Davis, 11, 16.

[79]Davis, 129.

[80]Davis, 11; NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 60. In 1926 the Alabama State Mothers' League became the Alabama Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers.

both associations. In the late 1920s she was a vice president of the NCCPT and state auditor for Georgia Federation of Colored Women. In addition, Reese was a Jeanes supervisor.[81] More examples of black leaders who were associated with both national groups can be found in Arkansas, Florida, and Kentucky.[82]

The Work of Black PTAs

PTAs in the segregated schools of the South worked to improve conditions for teachers and students, very much like their white counterparts around the United States. However, the specialized needs of the South called for intensive efforts in fundraising to cover the costs of building or improving school buildings and grounds, supplying books and other materials, and awarding scholarships to students. For example, the Delaware State Federation, a branch of the NACW, received "an appropriation of $40,000. . . from the state for a new school building."[83] In a study of nine states' white parent-teacher organizations in 1924 to 1925, Julian Butterworth detailed the percentage of time parent-teacher associations spent on various activities. Three southern states in the study top the rankings for majority of time spent on fundraising. These states are Virginia (74.4%), North Carolina

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[81]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 58; Davis, 131.

[82]Mrs. Claudine J. Bass of Little Rock, Arkansas is listed as NACW recording secretary for the years 1928 to 1930. There is a Mrs. O. J. Bass, also of Little Rock, who also served as a national recording secretary of the NCCPT around the same time. See Davis, 40 and NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary*, 68. Mrs. S. A. Blocker of Jacksonville, Florida, was at the organizational meeting of the Florida branch of the NACW and a Mrs. Mary Blocker, also of Jacksonville, a teacher, was the second president of the NCCPT, 1931-1935. See Davis, 124 and NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary*, 63. Also, kindergarten teacher Essie D. Mack of Louisville, Kentucky, was the editor of the "Kentucky Club Woman" and was quite active with the NCCPT. She was a vice president and then later president of the Kentucky Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, and she was the third president of the NCCPT, 1935-1939. See Davis, 299, 303 and NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary*,, 80.

[83]Davis, 121.

(64.4%), and Texas (60.0%).[84] Conversely, these states rank at the bottom of the study in regard to "directly concerned with the promotion of educational objectives."[85] This study based on white PTAs reveals the dire needs in southern white schools of this era. Though Butterworth did not review the activities of black associations, a careful review of the state reports reveals that they had very much the same interests as white associations.

In 1895, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin referred to the education of African American children as an important endeavor to be undertaken by women's clubs at the first meeting of the national conference of colored women (which shortly thereafter became the NACW).[86] Parent-teacher groups in the segregated schools of the South directed their efforts at parents and school improvement. They offered classes in canning, gardening, and food preservation for community members, while attempting to address a universal need of improving black schools. In West Virginia, "major emphasis. . . was placed on securing the school equipment and supplies that boards of education either would not or could not provide."[87] They focused on health issues and improving libraries. Black PTAs, such as those in Florida, sought to improve school plants and teacher preparation as well as work for legislation on behalf of children. "The Florida Congress initiated a program to help parents understand better what they could do for the child before he enters school, . . . emphasizing the relationship of the child's

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[84]Julian Butterworth, *The Parent-Teacher Association and Its Work* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), 126-127. The figures are based on towns with populations less than 2,500. Other states range from 35.9% (Iowa) to 56.3% (New Jersey). The other states are California, Michigan, New York, and Ohio.
[85]Ibid. Lowest is North Carolina (10.3%), with Virginia (13.5%) and Texas (14.6%) close behind. By contrast, the other states range from 15.8% (New Jersey) to 29.5% (New York).
[86]Davis, 17.
[87]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 73.

preschool training to his development and progress later on."[88] In Delaware, courses for black PTA members were offered at Morgan State College.

Supporting higher education, black PTA state organizations awarded scholarships to high school seniors. Scholarship loan funds were a popular idea with the NACW and its local clubs. For example, women's clubs in Kentucky established a scholarship loan fund in 1913.[89] In 1924, at their biennial, NACW president Hallie Brown challenged the club women to raise fifty thousand dollars for the scholarship loan fund to "safeguard the future advancement of the race through the education of youth."[90] This evolved to the Hallie Quinn Brown Scholarship Loan Fund shortly thereafter. Even though it had not met its goals and stood at twelve thousand dollars in 1930, the scholarship fund was still able to loan five hundred students the sum of two hundred and fifty dollars per year.[91]

In segregated schools, black PTAs supported literacy programs. And, in some instances, black PTAs revised school curricula to include black history. For example, the West Virginia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers in the late 1920s provided the school libraries with books on black history. They passed a resolution urging the "Negro history become a required subject in the school curriculum"[92] The greatest needs to be addressed by black PTAs were those of the health of children. Speakers at local and state meetings and literature addressed "cleanliness, sunlight and fresh air, proper food, sufficient sleep, and care of the eyes and teeth."[93]

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[88]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 63.
[89]Davis, 305.
[90]Davis, 68.
[91]Davis, xxiii, 105.
[92]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 73.
[93]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 65.

Yet, all of the above efforts mirror those of white PTAs. A key distinction between white and black PTAs was in the focus of black PTAs on developing leadership skills and improving race relations. This emphasis can be found in the literature on the NACW and the NCCPT. In many cases leadership workshops were held at local schools and colleges. For example, Tuskegee offered a course on leadership in the 1920s for black PTA members in Alabama. The course, as in the other states with black PTAs, was offered repeatedly over the years, and was developed into an institute for leaders.[94] Leadership training remained a staple of NCCPT state affiliates, as it did with the majority PTA. Though white PTA members enrolled in leadership training courses Cornell University and Teachers College, the need for leadership training among black PTAs was more urgent.[95] Anderson explains the centrality of leadership training in black communities in the South. Black teachers and leaders "believed that the masses could not achieve political and economic independence or self-determination without first becoming organized, and organization was impossible without well-trained intellectuals—teachers, ministers, politicians, managers, administrators, and businessmen."[96]

The onus fell on black citizens to improve relations and educate white PTAs on the importance of black education. Oklahoma, despite its small population of blacks, still worked toward improving "relations between the races."[97] Working toward better conditions for black schoolchildren, the Maryland Congress of Colored Parents and Teacher fought for a longer school year for black schools and for better school facilities. After the Brown

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[94]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 61.
[95]Butterworth, 123, mentions the types of topics covered at such leadership institutes. They included "the health of the child" and "the history and organization of the PTA."
[96]Anderson, 28.
[97]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 70.

decision, the NCCPT focused on eliminating Jim Crow laws.[98] Likewise, the NACW biennial in Oakland, California, declared the need for an emphasis on "Inter-Racial relations, in an effort to settle racial differences throughout the country. Inter-racial commissions were reported as accomplishing many improvements along those lines and especially in the Southland."[99] An emphasis on interracial relations can also be found among the work of the Jeanes Supervisors.[100]

Conclusion

The different attitudes of parent-teacher groups in black and white schools can be seen in excerpts from pro-association poetry published in the mid-twentieth century.

The PTA:

P.T.A.

This letter "P" is, as you see,
The first one in this group of three.
It stands for the Mothers and Fathers, too,
Who try to do what is best for you.

This letter "T" that's next, is mine,
And represents our teachers fine,
Who, with the Parents everywhere,
Are bound together in Child Welfare. . . [101]

The NCCPT:

Our Task

To love our youth more dearly every day
To guide their feet along life's dark highway,
To ponder o'er the task before us set
And smile when it is done,
This is my task.

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[98]NCCPT, *Coral Anniversary History*, 77.
[99]Davis, 70.
[100]*The Jeanes Story*, 47.
[101]Mary Mitchell Reno, "PTA," *Child Welfare Magazine* 21 (October 1926): 76; as cited in Cutler.

> To set before our youth the truth as light
> To do our best from early dawn till night,
> To give us eyes to see the still undone
> And fight and fight, till victory is won,
> This is our task. . .[102]

In the second excerpt no distinction is made between parents and teachers. And, the focus is on the work to be done—the task—unlike the first excerpt, in which the focus is on cooperation between constituencies.

Parent-teacher associations in the South from 1986 to 1926 increased in number and played an integral role in establishing public schools for African American children. Clearly, the desire for education and the drive for equality united black parents, teachers, principals, and community members around a common goal. While teachers and principals in white PTAs were advised to step back from leadership positions, "since the organization may lean to heavily upon them," black PTAs of the segregated South existed mainly due to the efforts and leadership of teachers and principals.[103]

African American club women of the NACW, and later, NCCPT, and Jeanes Supervisors played a key roll in school improvement, establishing parent-teacher groups, and supporting education for children, community members, and teachers. Bell hooks' contention that black women's organizations failed because they took on the "depoliticized" social service dimension of white women's associations overlooks the politicization of educational reform in black segregated schools of the South.[104] Moreover, this position overlooks the political nature of women's efforts through mothers' clubs and parent-teacher associations in any community. As such,

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[102]Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers. *Golden Anniversary History*. 26.
[103]Butterworth, 103.
[104]bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 176. Sieglinde Lemke cites hooks and challenges her assumption; I extend Lemke's argument to address the work of black women in PTAs.

the collaboration/cooperation versus conflict model does not apply to parent-teacher associations in black communities of the early twentieth century South, and perhaps beyond.

The founding in 1926 of a black national association for parent-teacher groups to an extent duplicated the efforts of the NACW. Why, then did it come about? The establishment of a public school system for African Americans in the first three decades of the twentieth century during a time of heightened interest in parent-teacher work certainly fueled interest in creating the NCCPT. It is possible, also, that African American leaders such as Selena Butler saw an opportunity for the educational needs of black children to be met through the strength and lobbying power of the PTA, which by 1930 had grown to nearly one million members. This suggestion is supported by her correspondence with the national PTA president. Margaretta Willis Reeve had originally approached Butler about maintaining segregated state associations while having only one national.[105] Reeve later decided that a national association for African American parent-teacher associations was best, much to Butler's dismay. Nonetheless, the work of the NCCPT had just begun. Into the twentieth century, black parent-teacher associations continued the work along the same lines as white PTAs, with additional emphases on leadership training and interracial cooperation and understanding. With the founding of the NCCPT in 1926, black educators and community members worked even more forcefully toward civil rights and equity in education in north and south.[106]

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[105]Margaretta Reeve to Selena Sloan Butler, April 3, 1924, as reprinted in Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, *Golden Anniversary*, 180.

[106]See, for example, Clarence Taylor, *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).